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Condensed History of Wrangell

In an early history of Mission work at Fort Wrangell we find this description: "The town is a mud hole and wharf, at least it must have been only that before the Missionaries made it s home; also substract the Home and the little signs of life about the town which are clearly its emination and it is a scene of desolation such as would fill your heart with a new appreciation of the spirit which sustained our dear Mrs. McFarland when the departing steamer left her, the only white woman in the place.

Notwithstanding this unfavorable description, Fort Wrangell is one of the most interesting places in this portion of the territory. It is one of the earliest settlements made by Americans after Alaska came into the United States. It is situated upon the northern extremity of Wrangell Island, which embraces about 8 or 10 square miles. The soil is very wet, poles being laid down in trails about three or four feet wide, for the village people to walk upon, and if one happens to slip upon one that is decayed, or where one has been removed, he immediately sinks to his knees in mud and mire.

In the vicinity of Ft. Wrangell some of the finest timber is found, and the largest saw-mill in the territory is built here, having a capacity of 30,000 per day.

In the village there are a half a dozen or more of stores, some of which carry a stock of goods which will compare favorably in quality and variety with many country towns in the States. The greatest variety of curios are offered here, and some of the finest furs and also found. It also contains the only poultry farm in Southeastern Alaska, eggs being sold at fifty cts. per dozen.

Many of the natives have cook stoves and modern furniture in their houses, and dress in civilized garb.

Previous to the arrival of Mrs. McFarland, one Phillip McKay a native, with some others, obtained employment from the government and located themselves at Ft. Wrangell. Being Christian Indians they began to hold services upon the Sabbath, which were continued through the summer of 1876, or until the contract for which the natives were engaged had expired. As they were about to return to Ft. Simpson, the Rev. Dr. Crosby, of the Canadian Methodist Church of that place, and who had given valuable assistance in conducting these services at Ft. Wrangell, persuaded Clah (Phillip McKay) to remain and open a school. Two others secured employment and gave their assistance to the school work. Thus was the seed sown to bear precious fruit under the watchful and preserving care of Mrs. McFarland and others who were called to labor at this point.

No permaneht place could be secured by Phillip McKay in which to conduct his school. Sometimes they would meet in a dance hall, and in a day or two in another place, wherever a vacant room could be found. The following list of appliances will show how poorly equipped they were for teaching. Four small bibles, four hymn books three primers, thirteen First Readers and one wall chart.

This was the condition at Ft. Wrangell when Mrs. McFarland found herself the only white woman in the place and the first American missionary in Alaska.

She soon discovered that her position meant more than simply to teach. The sick were brought to her and she must act in the capacity of physician. Upon her fell the conducting of Christian services for the dead. Domestic quarrels were brought to her for settlement, and in cases of disputes over property she must be a whole court within herself. Even in cases of hanging she was called to administer spiritual comfort to the condemned man.

In course of time an old log house was found in which to conduct this school, for which a rent of $20.00 per month was paid.

Clah was retained as assistant in this school until his death in December, 1877. Just before the dissolution of the mortal and "immortal" he was heard to say "as earth fades away heaven grows brighter," Jesus knows what is best."

The great need at this time was a minister, and after many disappointments, in which the Indians seemed to have the greatest share, the Rev. S. Hall Young, of Parkersburg, West Virginia, arrived. He very soon began to raise money for the church and school. About this time a little girl, thirteen years of age, one of the pupils of the day school, was rescued from her mother who was taking her away for the purpose of selling her to some Indians, in order to get money with which to buy some favorite food.

This was the beginning of the Home for Girls, to which Mrs. McFarland was looking forward with such fond desire. Soon other girls were added to the number, whose mothers were attempting to sell them into lives of sin. One is mentioned, who had been sold by her mother for ten blankets, and while waiting for the Indian to claim her was brought to the Home by her sister. A building suitable for the present accommodation of the girls was rented, butthere was no furniture and no means with which to purchase any.

Mrs. Julia McNair Wright, in her appeal in behalf of this Home for Girls, used these words: "O, mothers of our church, every one of you who holds a baby girl on your knee sees in her face the pleading of that babe cast out in the cold woods to die! You mothers whose homes are made fairer by a daughter's face, give something to save these other girls from shame and anguish, something to help us teach those other mothers how great a boon a little maiden may be at her own fireside."

Appeals were made by Dr. Jackson and others and in answer to them nearly five thousand dollars was contributed. Arrangements were made to begin building at once. The church was completed and occupied during the autumn of 1879. The Home was not finished until the Spring of 1880. The work so auspiciously inaugurated, and carried on with much success, was destined to pass through the dark shadow of adversity. There came a season of mourning over the loss by fire of the Girls' Home in February 1883. It was not thought wise to rebuild at this point and in the following year the Home was removed to Sitka.

It was during the early teaching at this point that Louis and Tillie Paul were converted. The former was drowned Dec. 13th 1887 and thelatter is now one of the most successful teachers at Sitka.

Mrs. A. R. McFarland, Dr. and Mrs. J. W. McFarland, Miss Dunbar Rev. S. Hall Young and wife, Rev. W. H. R. Corlies,M. D., and wife, were the first American Missionaries to this most northwest region.

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Ft. Wrangell, Alaska.

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